

The **UNITED STATES SENATE**
COMMITTEE on FINANCE
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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on the Nominations of Chiquita Brooks-LaSure to be CMS Administrator and Andrea Palm to be HHS Deputy Secretary
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee meets this morning to discuss two key health care nominations. Chiquita Brooks-LaSure is nominated to serve as Administrator for the Centers on Medicare & Medicaid Services, and Andrea Palm is nominated to serve as Deputy Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Ms. Brooks-LaSure has served at OMB, on staff at the Ways and Means Committee, at HHS, and in the private sector. She helped craft policies bringing down costs for seniors on Medicare. She helped to develop and pass key portions of the Affordable Care Act. At HHS she helped implement the law. She also worked hard to make sure that middle class Americans shopping for private health insurance would get a fair shake thanks to strong consumer protections.

The Trump administration later undermined a lot of those protections, which has created a lot of new challenges for this committee and the Biden administration to address.

Ms. Brooks-LaSure is also well versed in Medicaid policy. She's worked closely with everybody involved in Medicaid – the federal government, states and private organizations – to try to expand coverage, improve care and help people get ahead.

Continuing on the theme of impeccable qualifications and experience, Andrea Palm is a proven health care agency leader who knows exactly what it takes to run HHS smoothly. She previously served as the department's chief of staff and senior counselor to the Secretary during the Obama administration. More recently, she served as secretary-designee of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, a \$12 billion dollar agency with 6,100 employees. She's been the point person when it comes to the COVID response in the state of Wisconsin. She's also led efforts to expand insurance coverage, improve mental health care and reduce hunger.

Bottom line, these are both highly qualified nominees who will be ready to go on day one after they're confirmed by the Senate. There's a lot of work to be done at HHS in the months and years ahead, beginning with continuing the fight against COVID-19. Vaccinations are way up, but cases and deaths are still awfully high. There's a long way to go in this pandemic.

This committee's also going to keep up its work on other health challenges facing the American people. For example, I've said that every time we discuss our federal health programs, we're going to talk about the transformation of Medicare. Medicare used to be an acute care program – broken ankles and bouts of the flu. These days it's a chronic care program – cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes. This committee led the passage of the Chronic Care Act in 2017. The Trump administration slow-walked its implementation. I'm going to work with these nominees to turn that around.

Second, in the American Rescue Plan the Congress made a big down payment for mental health services based on the CAHOOTS program. It's all about using health care, rather than law enforcement, to help people experiencing a mental health crisis. It's been a big success in Oregon, and I want to expand it even further.

This committee is also putting a special focus on the issue of inequality in our federal programs. Especially during the pandemic, the American people have seen the results of health care disparities up close. Black, Latino and Native Americans have suffered and died from COVID-19 at much higher rates. However, it's not just about COVID-19. It's also about maternal health, because women today are more likely to die in childbirth than their mothers were a generation ago.

I also want to work closely with HHS on the issue of lowering prescription drug costs. That's because Americans get socked every time they walk up to the pharmacy window, and it's long past time for Congress to act.

Finally, this country needs a revolution when it comes to access to mental health care. The law says that mental health care and physical health care are equally important, but in practice, mental health is often given short shrift. This is a major priority for members of this committee, so we'll continue working closely with these nominees on this issue – and all these issues I've raised – when they're confirmed.

I want to thank Ms. Brooks-LaSure and Ms. Palm for their willingness to serve in these extraordinarily challenging and vital roles. I look forward to the discussion today.

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